

The newest Americans: Nearly 50 former immigrants become U.S. citizens

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GODFREY - A ceremony hosted at the Alton High School Auditorium by the United States District Court, Southern District of Illinois welcomed 47 new United States citizens Wednesday morning.

The event was hosted by Alton High School U.S. history honors students, who also participate in the Illinois Global Scholars Program with instructors Jordan Anderson and Todd Fortschneider. Students were able to work in conjunction with the Federal Circuit Clerk's office in East St. Louis to organize the event. In fact, during the ceremony, the Alton High School Auditorium acted as a United States Federal courtroom, despite its celebratory nature and lack of many formalities.

Court was opened by Justine Flanagan, the clerk of court for the U.S. district court, before the Alton High School JROTC presented colors and the Alton High School Chamber Singers performed the "Star-Spangled Banner." United States District Judge David R. Herndon presided over the ceremony, during which 47 immigrants from The Philippines, Mexico, Colombia, Germany, Palestine, Pakistan, Iraq, Latvia, Russia, Canada, Vietnam, China and Korea, among other nations, took the following oath:

I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state or sovereignty of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen; that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I will bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by law; that I will perform noncombatant service in the armed forces of the United States when required by law; that I will perform work of national importance under civilian direction when required by the law; and that I take this obligation freely without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion: So help me God.

Following the oath, each new U.S. citizen was given a microphone to say their name, their nation of origin and any other comments they would like to add. Most of the people said some form of "thank you," to the U.S. for being so accommodating, loving or welcoming to them. Some of them had just become eligible for citizenship, but many had lived legally in the U.S. for decades, some of them even raising families here.

Madison County Board Chairperson Kurt Prenzler's wife, Rita Prenzler - who is originally from Latvia - said she has lived in the country for many years and has raised a family. She was not the only one. Several of the new U.S. citizens have lived in the nation for years and have families. Some of them were students, some of them were scientists. All of them were excited to take part in the workings of a nation, which invited them.

Kurt Prenzler said the first thing his wife did after receiving her citizenship was register to vote and then took advantage of early voting in Madison County.



Chief Judge of the Third Judicial Circuit (including both Madison and Bond Counties) David Hylla was the keynote speaker at the event. He told the story of his great-grandparents who traveled to America from Germany to work as coal miners in Madison. He continued sharing the stories and heritage of his family, who began as most American families - as immigrants, and encouraged the new U.S. citizens to embrace their new citizenship, but said it was vital to maintain their heritage.

"Never forget where you came from," Hylla said. "Embrace that heritage. We're a country of old and new and many cultures coming together as one. Don't forget what you learned and knew, bring those ideas here. We are a country always in need of new ideas."

Hylla spoke of other famous immigrants, such as physicist Albert Einstein, journalist William Pultizer and activist Mother Jones - who is buried in Mt. Olive. He used their examples to illustrate the importance of immigrants, but noted many who are not so remembered by history who struggled and worked hard to raise families and keep the American dream alive.

He also spoke of his accordion skills, which were mentioned in Herndon's introduction of him as well. Hylla said his accordion skills, which helped pay for his education in law, were passed down through his family heritage. He said he was excited to play many traditional tunes at next month's Polish Heritage Festival in his hometown of Madison, Illinois, but added he would also be playing many American favorites from Johnny Cash to Adele. He used his music as a way to thread America's diverse blend of time and culture into a true "melting pot."

After Hylla's remarks, the Alton High School Chamber Singers took the stage again before Alton High School Student Council President led the crowd in the Pledge of Allegiance.